

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Botching statistics

The Oregon Health Authority announced on Thursday, Oct. 21 that about 550 more Oregonians have died after testing positive for COVID-19 than the agency has reported. Most of these previously untallied deaths happened between May and August of this year.

This is no minor mistake. Adding these deaths will boost Oregon's total pandemic death toll by about 13%. And Oregonians deserve a more thorough explanation than a "technical computer error," the term OHA offered last week. This blunder undoubtedly will exacerbate the debate that the pandemic has inflamed. Some people are angry that the state has understated how dangerous the virus is. Others will distrust the accuracy of the numbers, which is unfortunate.

According to OHA, employees manually reconcile death records to case records, and although the agency is trying to automate the process, the manual method "has led to periodic backlogs," including the problem announced Thursday. But previous instances have involved a handful of deaths, not 550. A more detailed explanation won't alleviate all suspicions, to be sure. But it needs to happen regardless.

—Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor

OTHER VIEWS

Rethink mandate

Editorial from The Detroit News:

Weeks after President Joe Biden announced his decree that roughly 80 million workers would need to get the COVID-19 vaccine or weekly testing, many details of that order are still unknown. Business groups are rightly pushing back against an undefined, invasive mandate that could exacerbate an already tight labor market.

After months of being told what they could and couldn't do by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, Michigan companies are seeking to normalize their operations and tackle the workforce shortages so many employers are facing.

This new federal order that would impact businesses with 100 or more employees places an unnecessary burden on employers to force workers to comply — or face stiff fines. In addition, the logistics of the mandatory testing and the costs involved remain a mystery.

Last week, several chambers of commerce, led by the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, asked Biden to rethink his vaccine rules, and let states determine the best way to handle vaccinations.

Better yet, the government should just let the private sector figure this out for itself.

"I don't think anybody needs to be reminded of how divisive this is, and we're again going to be inserting employers right into the middle of that," said Andy Johnston of the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce.

The group, Listen to MI Businesses Coalition, makes a good case. Wendy Block, vice president of business advocacy and member engagement at the Michigan Chamber, says more business associations are signing on each day. It's similar to the Reopen Michigan Safely effort that businesses championed earlier this year to fight state orders banning a return to the office.

"We're creating an outlet for Michigan businesses to make their voices heard," Block says. "We want to be clear we aren't anti-vaccine. It is about being opposed to an unprecedented top-down mandate of this type. Not all states are the same."

Mandates in general seem to backfire. For instance, nearly all of the major airlines have instituted vaccine requirements for employees, following Biden's September announcement. And it hasn't gone well.

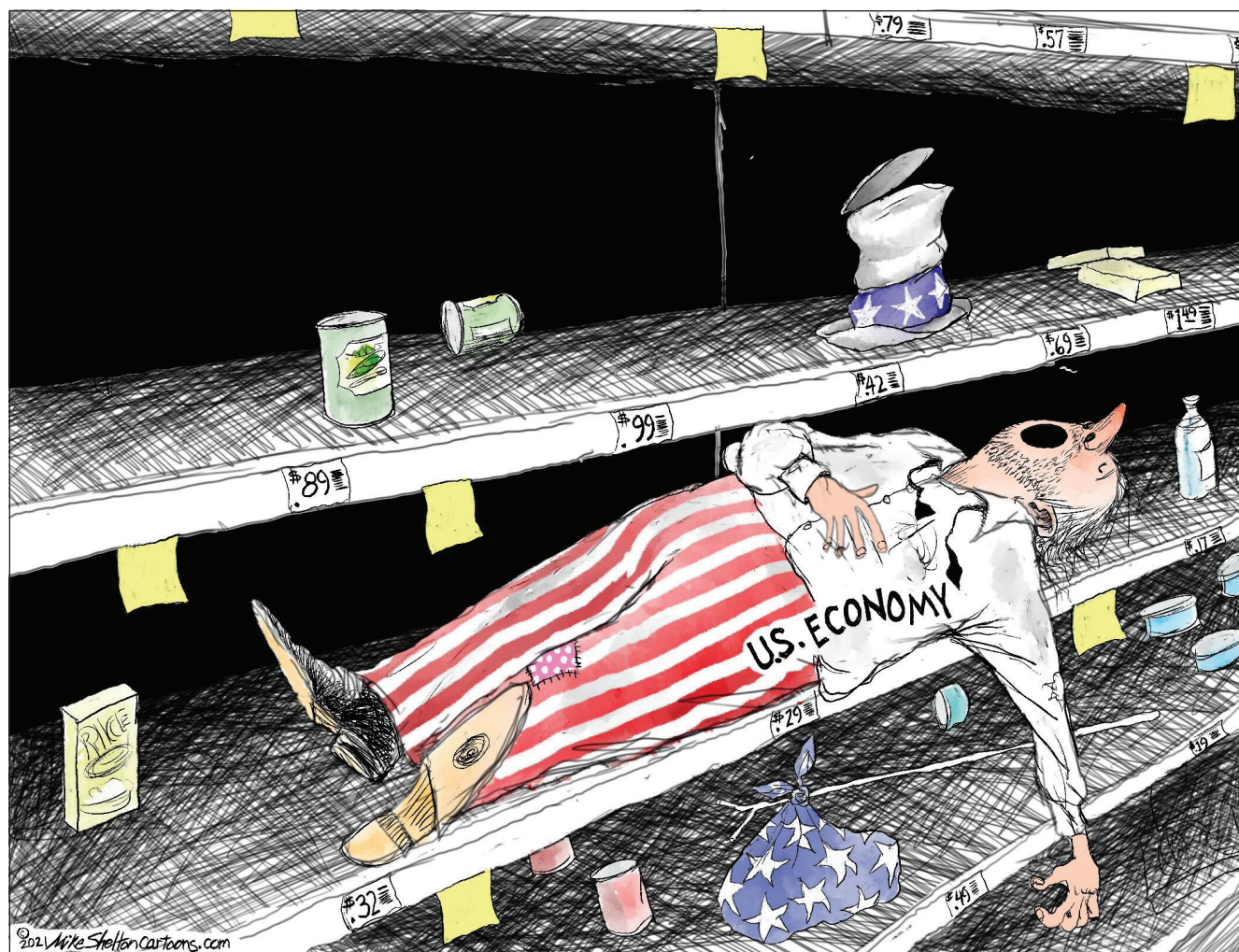
Delta Air Lines, on the other hand, is taking a gentler approach. It's the only U.S. carrier that has said it won't enforce a vaccine mandate. Employees seem to be responding positively. The company says more than 90% of its workforce has received the vaccine, and that percentage is expected to rise.

Biden has tasked the U.S. Labor Department's Occupational Health and Safety Administration to issue rarely-used "emergency temporary standards," which sidestep the formal rule-making process and Congress. The rules are before the Office of Management and Budget, and this review could take months.

In the meantime, 24 attorneys general sent a letter to Biden, challenging what they call an unlawful mandate.

"Your plan is disastrous and counterproductive," they wrote. "From a policy perspective, this edict is unlikely to win hearts and minds — it will simply drive further skepticism. And at least some Americans will simply leave the job market instead of complying. This will further strain an already-too-tight labor market, burdening companies and (therefore) threatening the jobs of even those who have received a vaccine."

Biden's vaccine mandate goes too far by interfering in private employers' decisions, and will likely only cement more opposition to the shots. The administration should listen to these businesses' concerns and back down.



Your views

Raise money first, then proceed with train quiet zone

I attended the Baker City Council meeting on Oct. 12th, a meeting mainly about the city council discussing the railroad quiet zone idea. There were at least 50 to 60 people at the meeting. I heard several people complain about the stress and mental damage that the horns create, one presentation from Peter Fargo about the private group trying to raise money to get a railroad quiet zone established and a big split, down the middle, amongst the city council members. One of the points of concern is the health and safety of the children at South Baker Intermediate School. The school is right next to the railroad tracks.

The South Baker Intermediate School is a very concerning situation. I feel that Peter Fargo's concern for his daughter's health and safety, as well as the other children, is real and heartfelt. The school was built in the mid-1950s. Why was it built there, at that time? The train had already been going by for decades by then. As I have pointed out before, the worst potential catastrophe scenario for Baker City would be a train derailment within the city limits. If it happened next to the school, the results could be beyond belief. Mr. Fargo's battle about the horns and potential health and safety hazards should be with the Baker School District. In recent years the school board decided to close Churchill and North Baker schools. That left the only school in the entire west end of Baker City open, next to the railroad tracks.

The folks of Baker City just passed a school bond on May 18, 2021 for \$4 million, with matching funds, for improving school facilities and safety. The Baker School District bond is supposed to "prioritize safety and security and improve capacity in all schools." What better way to spend some of that money than to fix up North Baker School and close down South Baker Intermediate for good.

I did hear one very interesting observation at the council meeting. Why aren't any of the folks in favor of keeping the train whistle at these city council meetings, when the main topic is discussions about the whistle? According to Mayor McQuisten's recent post (from Jayson Jacoby's editorial) on her Facebook page, "1500 people are in favor of the quiet zone and roughly 8500 people are not." Approximately 50 to 60 people attended the city council meeting on Oct. 12th, almost all were in favor of the quiet zone. What is everyone else doing? You folks need to stop giving Mayor McQuisten your opinions in the supermarket and show up at these meetings. It also would not hurt to voice your opinions to all the

city council members via emails, they are not that hard to find.

I do have a suggestion concerning this idea. No more motions for the city to move ahead with the quiet zone application until the Quiet Zone group comes up with the entire funds needed for this project.

Roger LeMaster
Baker City

What's wrong with asking voters to decide on horns?

Let's not start name-calling over a train horn, please. A letter from Cynthia Roberts stated "The city council routinely approves projects that the majority might not support." What a sad and shameful statement to make. She said that "McQuisten, Dixon, and Waggoner showed a lack of integrity by requesting a majority vote on a ballot measure for the quiet zone project." That tells me who really lacks integrity and who really has it. I am disturbed when the mayor and councilors are called out when they are trying to do the right thing. Mayor McQuisten and Councilors Dixon and Waggoner understand that they work for the people. All they asked for was a majority vote regarding the quiet zone.

Others think they have all the answers about what's best for the city and they don't have to involve the public. Jayson Jacoby's article made a lot of sense to me and if this issue is put to a vote and doesn't cost the taxpayers, I might go for it. But frankly, I believe that if at all possible we should always hear other people's views, and this is mine: Residents of Baker City have been plagued at other times by folks who want change and think they know best. Now they have focused on "harmful train horns." They are trying to explain the need to quiet train horns in order to save the children. Of course, no one would want to continue harming the children the way it's been done for years and years. We must feel guilty now.

Perhaps these irritated people would be better suited for a town I once resided in and have since visited. I was kept up literally from dusk until dawn and beyond with the screaming sirens and police helicopters slinking up and down driveways with their search lights on. All bigger cities have these noises to contend with. Maybe these folks are new here and have not yet learned how to adjust to country living. I imagine the trains have been rolling through Baker City since before the school in South Baker, and, by the way, the children have been growing up here with the sound of trains and their horns for decades and they are doing just fine in the world.

Perhaps the people who are unable to tolerate train horns and who live in fear that they are harmful to the population haven't been here long enough to join the foolish group that tried to ban the roosters that crow in the morning? I suggest they look them up and form a group that could identify annoying reasons to leave this lovely, quiet little town to those who enjoy things the way they are.

Barbara Rockenbrant
Baker City

North Baker transportation project has great benefits

The North Baker Transportation Improvement Project (NBTIP) is a significant opportunity to improve Baker City for all residents. We have funding of nearly eight million dollars from the state, county, and city, and the potential for even more financing, to improve the safety and accessibility of Tenth, Pocahontas/Hughes, and Cedar streets. But only if our elected officials vote to adopt the NBTIP plan.

Many people from Baker City, Baker County, Oregon Department of Transportation, and HDR Engineering worked together to develop practical street designs that meet the needs of drivers and incorporate features that allow pedestrians, bicyclists, and wheelchair/scooter users to travel down and across these streets safely. The plan retains four vehicle lanes on Tenth Street while improving sidewalks, bike lanes, and crossings on all three streets. This is a win-win solution for all people traveling in North Baker. The funds and the road improvements will only be realized with the approval of the Baker City Council and the Baker County Commissioners.

The NBTIP plan is a 20-year project that will be reviewed and adjusted as the process moves forward; however, the end result will be a safer, more livable community for all of us. Baker citizens have played an important role in accomplishing many beneficial community projects such as the all-abilities playground, the Leo Adler Memorial Parkway, the Heritage Museum, and the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center. Residents who see the benefits of bringing millions of dollars into our community and improving Tenth, Pocahontas/Hughes, and Cedar streets can help this project happen too. Learn more at https://www.bakercity.com/DocumentCenter/View/1961/TM6_Future-Conditions_Analysis_Final and voice your support to Baker City Council members and Baker County Commissioners. Help make this valuable project a reality.

Gretchen Stadler
Citizen member, NBTIP Technical Advisory Committee, Baker City

CONTACT YOUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

President Joe Biden: The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C. 20500; 202-456-1111; to send comments, go to www.whitehouse.gov.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley: D.C. office: 313 Hart Senate Office Building, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-3753; fax 202-228-3997. Portland office: One World Trade Center, 121 S.W. Salmon St. Suite 1250, Portland, OR 97204; 503-326-3386; fax 503-326-2900. Baker City office, 1705 Main St., Suite 504, 541-278-1129; merkley.senate.gov.

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden: D.C. office: 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-5244; fax 202-228-2717. La Grande office: 105 Fir St., No. 210, La Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-7691; fax, 541-963-0885; wyden.senate.gov.

U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz (2nd District): D.C. office: 2182 Rayburn Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20515, 202-225-6730; fax 202-225-5774. La Grande office: 1211 Washington Ave., La Grande, OR 97850; 541-624-2400, fax, 541-624-2402; walden.house.gov.